

# OLIVER JACKSON:

## FORMER ST. LOUISAN FEATURED AT ART MUSEUM

BY ELIZABETH WRIGHT MILLARD



Jackson

Since the 1960s Oliver Jackson has challenged the traditional notion of modern painting.

Jackson was a member of St. Louis' Black Artists Group (BAG), a grass-roots organization begun in 1968 by a group of black artists who wanted to promote and develop the talents of blacks in St. Louis and to introduce black culture to the inner city.

Among Jackson's fellow members were jazz musicians Julius Hemphill and Oliver Lake, the poet Bruce Rutlin, dancer Georgia Collins and painter Emilio Cruz. His early association with

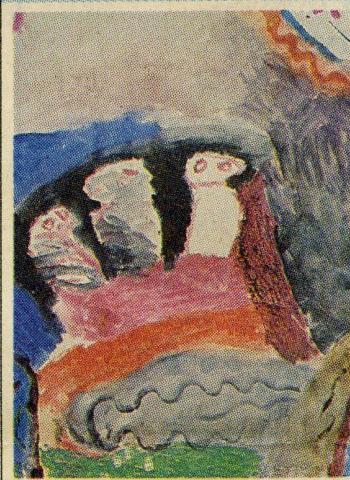
this group of talented artists helped him develop a multifaceted aesthetic. Jackson chose not to work in the traditional narrative style of the Midwest regionalists, nor to explore the continuation of abstraction into minimalism as was common during the 1960s. Instead his painting style is a combination of influences that range from the drip paintings of Jackson Pollock and the late figural works of Philip Guston to the jazz compositions of his friend Julius Hemphill.

Jackson was born in St. Louis in 1935. He earned his bachelor of fine arts degree in 1958 from Illinois Wesleyan University and a master of fine arts from the University of Iowa in 1963. He is currently an art professor at California State University in Sacramento.

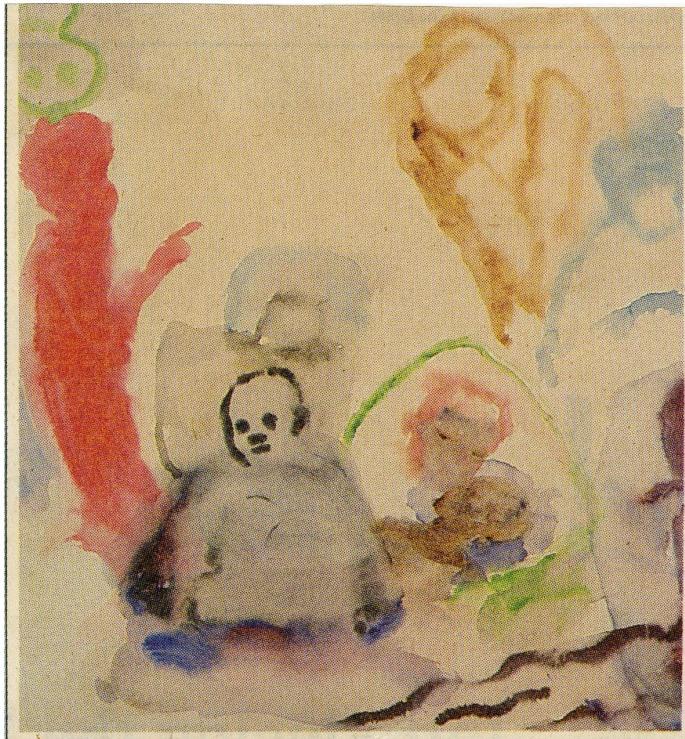
In 1971 Jackson moved to the San Francisco Bay area, where the strong legacy of the abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Clifford Still melded with Bay Area figurative artists like Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliveira and Joan Brown to create a dynamic and vital artistic environment. Jackson, however, cannot be considered solely within regional context. His work on one hand shows a deeply personal and spiritual aspect through his use of highly charged color and personal symbols; on the other hand, it is rooted in his comprehensive knowledge of art history.

These large scale drawings exemplify many facets of Jackson's work. Throughout his paintings and drawings, there is a complex structure beneath the expressionistic surface.

Jackson's thorough understanding of Western art history, from Giotto and El Greco, to Rembrandt and Vermeer and on to Willem De Kooning coupled with his strong technical expertise, allows him to challenge the



Untitled (8.27.89) detail



Untitled (8.22.89II) detail

conventions without destroying the underlying principles of good painting and everything in it--whether it is the realism of a Vermeer or the 'abstraction' of Pollack--is a vehicle for something beyond it. It has to be put together as perfectly as possible, like any vehicle, but it is the vision beyond that gives the painting meaning."

Jackson's compositions grow together in an organic way. He likens them to plants: as creator he gives them only what is necessary to make them complete. When making a large painting (often 10x15 feet) Jackson works on the floor--stepping into the painting from various angles to approach the piece in a variety of ways. With the drawings, however, he generally begins in a corner; he is hesitant to put too much visual weight in the center of a picture.

Since the figures are not narrative, they float throughout the picture plane, guiding the viewer into the spiritual world of the painting. In Untitled (6.21.88) the curled-up figures and the writhing background function as equal entities. Jackson maintains that the figures in his work are neither illustrative nor representative of forms other than themselves. He calls them "perfectly accurate paint men and paint women and they take on life solely within the painting." The figures often act within the painting as characters caught up in an ambiguous drama.

Throughout Jackson's work there are recurring symbols. These sometimes are viewed as Jungian archetypes that allow us to travel the route of the spirit rather than the mind. The hat seen in Untitled (2.17.88-I) is something Jackson associated as a child with maleness and with a certain age or wisdom. Jackson also describes the hat as "a knowing kind of image around which order takes place." In many of his paintings and drawings, the figures are drawn together into a circle that becomes a way of expressing intimacy and harmony.

"Three people will take on a circular space if they are close friends, and it is always a sacred place." This also is associated with the sacred rings of myth and magic, and it provides a forum in which some type of action may occur. However, this action is usually vague, as it has no reference in the everyday world. Jackson maintains, "The responsibility of the artist is to give back--not a reflection (of the everyday), but a sense of clarity about the spiritual state. He is in a position of leadership with regard to where the spiritual state and sensibility should be moving. That is his business. And above all things it should not be reflective!"

Jackson has continued associating with jazz musicians since his early

days with Julius Hemphill, and they have profoundly affected his work, in particular those paintings and drawings that rely on large areas of white space with figural passages working through the void. Untitled 8.22.89-II illustrates the effects of this association.

Working with musicians taught him about the whole matter of time in a painting, the need to eliminate dead spots, the parts that don't move.

"From musicians I learned how to get into a painting, to find an opening. The most important thing you learn from the best musicians is: Just play the tune. There are some tunes, certain thematic ideas, that call for lots of notes and speed and intricacy. Others have to be done with very few notes and very simply. The same is true of painting."

Jackson's friend, the poet, Michael Harper, wrote, "Music is the organization of sound that can evoke harmonious states of being, modes of feeling, the ancient sense of the breaking of the spheres."

Oliver Jackson plays his tune well. His vividly colored paint men and paint women engage the viewer in this mysterious performance that is the "breaking of the spheres."

Jackson's paintings will be on display through Sept. 16 at the art museum.

(Elizabeth Wright Millard is Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art at The St. Louis Art Museum.)

**NOTE:** Jackson's painting show has been extended until Sept. 30. He will also conduct a free lecture Sept. 16 at 2:30 p.m. in the art museum auditorium. A special gallery talk will be conducted Sept. 18 at 6:30 at the museum. Participants should meet at the information desk.